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Ascriptive Quasi-State Entities (AQSE): concept and features

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Abstract

Ascriptive Quasi-State Entities are the great geo-political novelty of the last few decades. This essay conceptualizes the phenomenon through the dynamic sociology approach. Ascription is a form of psychological organization almost disappeared in the western world, but still alive in traditional societies, mostly in Asia, Africa and Middle East, in opposition to subjectivity, ruling our societies. In recent times, Islamic fundamentalist organizations refused the western concept of modern state, built around the principles of subjectivity, developing a new form of political entity, founded on traditional institutions and ascription as dominant form of psychological organization. The foundation of AQSE followed the collapse and fragmentation of western style state entities. The most notorious cases have been the Taliban Emirate of Afghanistan and the Caliphate of ISIS.

Keywords: political sociology, dynamic sociology, forms of psychological organization, ascription, subjectivity, political entities, fundamentalism.

1. The sociological concepts of ascription and re-ascription

Dynamic sociology is the sociological approach which studies the effects of *social forces* operating in the *social* and *cultural systems* on the *systems of personality* of individuals, fixing the different *forms of psychological organization* assumed through cultivation or primary and secondary socialization processes (AISoD 2015). It is an innovative social theory, mainly based on a reworked version of concepts taken from Odum, Parsons, Marcuse, Luhmann and Foucault (Scarcella Prandstraller 2015: 439).

The concept of *ascription* comes from Talcott Parsons' dichotomy *achievement vs. ascription*. Parsons uses these terms as a structural variable concerning alternative ways of considering the individual object of an interaction process. *Achievement* means considering the individual on the basis of *general criteria of performance*, including educational qualifications and capabilities, achieved through training and experience. *Ascription*, on the contrary, means basing consideration of the individual on ascribed qualities, a *combination of features* that he/she cannot modify in any way, such as lineage, sex, age, cast, tribe, ethnic or religious group (Parsons 1951, 1996: 211-219).

In *dynamic approach*, *ascription* is a very old *social technology* characterizing traditional societies and cultures and a *form of psychological organization*, opposed to *subjectivity*, which is typical and functional to modern *acquisitive* societies. *Ascriptive* societies are very different one another, and after the acculturation processes of the colonial and post-colonial age, are very rarely pure. China, India and many Eastern and Islamic societies are hybrid types, where *subjects* and *ascriptive* people coexist, and with different institutions, often giving rise to contradictions and conflicts.

These are the *dynamic sociology* approach variables of *ascription* (Scarcella Prandstraller 2015: 439-450):

- 1) *Hetero-reference*: it is an external element (a religious/metaphysical or traditional entity) that directs decision-making in the community and is an absolute precondition for the processing of experience by individuals too.
- 2) *Necessary sharing*: hetero-reference is something which "represents the ultimate reason for the order of human coex-

istence” (Luhmann 1971, 1973: 7), expressing the essence of the “community as necessary sharing” and “irrevocable basis of the social bond”(Bortolini 2005). The individual feels deeply bound to his/her community, representing a sort of *chosen people*.

3) *Inequality*: human beings are not equal and their differences are due to ascribed attributes (birth, religion, lineage, race, caste, sex, age). Anyone who is part of the *chosen people* deserves respect and solidarity, while others are enemies; in the community, there are “procedures of *ascending* individualization”(Foucault 1975, 1993: 210), from the lowest subordinates to the chiefs.

4) *Imperative of tradition*: there are no written and changeable norms of human legislators but rather only rules directly derived from sacred texts or oral tradition. These rules regulate in a complete way the duties both toward the hetero-reference and other men; the community has a group of experts with a monopoly over the interpretation of these texts, while power is vested in an unique authority, both political and religious at the same time.

5) *Cultivation*: under ascription, social life is mainly the “fulfillment of previously established ultimate goals”; socialization processes have no reason to exist. The new-born is simply cultivated to the “cosmic order” or “ultimate interpretations of the world” (Luhmann 1971, 1973: 2).

6) *Functional unity of Self*: The ascriptive man/woman has no representation of changeable social roles like the *subject*. He/she acts in a certain way because he/she recognizes that his/her action is required by an order of things that is right and cannot be changed.

7) *Oral communication*: communication and transmission of knowledge are mainly oral, and every relationship is direct and personal, without any social roles.

8) *Intensity and visibility of punishment*: Little freedom of action is left to the individual, rules are harshly enforced and disagreement is not admitted. Deterrence is not assured by the certainty of the sanction, but by “its intensity, its public and exemplary nature” (Foucault 1975, 1993: 7).

Some of current Islamic fundamentalist people are living from several generations in Western countries or have high social status in their countries, and therefore they previously have socialized as *subjects*. *Re-ascription* is in fact a condition of relapse into *ascription*, a way out of *subjectivity* in favour of a new kind of hetero-reference, due to a radical conversion to an innovative existential path, in our case to the beliefs of a fundamentalist group.

2. The ideology of current Islamic fundamentalist organizations

“Islam” in Arab means “submission”, in the sense of “complete submission to God”, “*Allah*”, and the believer is named “*Muslim*”. The Muslims believe in one and unique God, in his Angels, in the Prophets, in the day of final judgement and in eternal life after death (Ippolito 2000: 132).

Mohammed is the Last Prophet, to whom God revealed the final message to humankind, and thus he has become His messenger, *Rasul Allah* (Pace 1999: 39).

Allah is always actively omnipresent and personally and directly regulates everything. The centre of Islam is His positive law, the *Shari'a*, literally “the straight way”, whose peculiar-

ity is to discipline the whole human activity in the external world (Bausani 2001: 37-38).

Both the dimensions of *ibhadat*, the duties of man toward God, and *mu'amalat*, the duties of men between themselves, are disciplined by the *Shari'a*, and according to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, any possible intrusion of rules coming from secular authorities is not tolerable (Bausani 2001: 41-42).

On this point, explains Pellicani that “the idea itself, so typical of liberal democracy, according to which the law is something made by men, may only result blaspheme to Islamic fundamentalists, who consider the legislative power reserved to God. They consequently see in the law the word of God (“*Kalam Allah*”), in front of which just one attitude is conceivable: the absolute obedience, the submission without reserves, the Islam” (Pellicani 2004: 52).

The Arab term “*jihad*” appears several times in the *Qu'ran* and literally means “*fight*”, “*effort*”. It is present in the double meaning of “*great jihad*” of the human soul toward transcendence and eternal salvation (“*jihad fi sabil Allah*”, “*the effort in the walk of God*”), and “*little jihad*”, as holy war of the faithful against the infidels, and as such, against the “*Dar-al-Harb*”, “*land of the sword*”, to turn it into “*Dar-al-Islam*”, “*land of submission*” (Jacobucci 2005: 269).

Current Islamic fundamentalist ideology is based on the *Wahhabite* system of beliefs, the same one officially endorsed in Saudi Arabia, the same country hosting among its citizens the more rich and generous financial supporters of ISIS (Stanford University 2017). Most of terrorists of September 11th 2001 attacks, as Osama Bin Laden himself, were of Saudi nationality or origins.

The *Wahhabiya* is based both on *Qu'ran* and on *Hadith* as fundamental texts, the latter being a sort of larger extension of the *Sunnah*. The *Sunnah* identifies with “the way in which Prophet Mohammed lived his life” and is considered the second source of Islamic jurisprudence after the *Qu'ran* by all the *Sunnites*, which are the large majority of Muslims in the world. The *Hadith*, on the contrary, is a plurality of literature sources, containing “a narration on the life of the Prophet”, and “an indication of the things He has approved”, by “actions, words, acts of silent approval and His *sifaat*”, or “physical appearance”, interpreted by a category of specialists, the *Muhaddithiin* (Scarcella Prandstraller 2007: 105).

What's more, the *Wahhabiya* accepts several commentaries, like the *Kitab-al-Tawid*, or “Book of Monotheism” of Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, the founder of *Wahhabiya* itself¹, and the precedent ones of Ibn Taymyya. The *Kitab-al-Tawid* is a very complex exegetic text, in 66 chapters, which face many basic aspects of faith and religious observance, making of every act of religious practice and often of social life a ritualized moment, marked by many outward prescriptions (Abd Al-Wahhab 1998).

The result is an approach to Islam based on a puritan, scrupulous, formal and literal monotheistic observance, called *salaphite*, from the *salaf al-ṣaliḥīn*, “the pious ancestors”. It excludes all what they consider as *bidah*, “contemptible in-

1. Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab around 1744 traveled to Dar'iyya and formed an alliance with the emir Mohammed Ibn Sa'ud, the chief of Sa'ud family, who soon after would have done of the *Wahhabiya* the official religion of the first Saudite State, justifying his jihad against other Muslims not accepting the ideas of Wahhb of “*shirk*” (polytheism) or “*kufir*” (misbelieve).

novations”², superstitions and heresies, like “the invocation in prayers of prophets, saints and angels”, or “the requests for saints’ intercession”, labelled as “polytheistic in nature”. It rejects to acknowledge any right to women. Any kind of mysticism or any variation in the exterior forms of religious practice are forbidden. *Wahhabiya* considers approaches like *Sh’ia* and *Sufi* not just “heretic”, but “not Islamic” at all.

Arguments recurring in an obsessive manner in *Wahhabiya* are *shirk*, “polytheism”, *kufir*, “misbelieve”, and *tawid*, “purity of monotheism”. They are a central element of the system of beliefs, at the origin of a strong intra and extra Islamic aggressiveness. Psychologically it transforms in *acting-out* not simply through a mechanism of refusal of the diversity of the other, but of its radical *disconfirmation* and labelling as “ignorant”, “misbeliever”, “polytheist”, “idolatrours”, and thus dangerous and unworthy of any dialogue or consideration. Explains Zamin Zakaria that *Saudi-salaphites* “are like programmed to aggress other Muslims on irrelevant matters... If someone dares to challenge them with logical reasoning, it is immediately reduced to the rank of a misleading innovator, lacking the true knowledge of sacred texts” (Zakaria 2004).

Wahhabiya, with its myths of purity of monotheism and link to ancestors and traditions, has been successful in spreading- to many Islamic fundamentalist organizations, such as Al-Quaeda, Taliban and ISIS- most of its system of symbols, beliefs and representations. They include the *shaykh*, “the re-

2. For many Wahhbite fundamentalists, the concept of *bidah* comprises all the acquisitions of acculturation processes, like modernity and democracy.

vered wise man”, which embodies authoritarianism of religious matrix, a charismatic figure, who is both a political and religious leader. These organizations have also taken from Wahhabiya relevant traits as *ritualism* and *disconfirmation of other's identity* (Scarcella Prandstraller 2007: 121-123).

3. The opposition to *subjectivity* and the idea of modern state

Jessica Carter writes: “we are bewildered and disoriented by the brutality: headlines warn of systematic beheadings of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, evidence of Christian genocide, men being burned alive, mass executions on the beaches of the Mediterranean – a sea that touches the West. These are acts far from the reality of most people living in the 21st century, and more like something out of a Hollywood movie portraying horror plots or times long past. Yet ISIS is very real and those of us who spend a lot of time in front of those headlines are becoming hostage to a very heavy question: how will it be stopped?” Shortly after, Carter touches the core of the matter: “While no one knows the answer quite yet, we need to understand what triggered this phenomenon and how our world has changed in a way to permit the existence of a movement like ISIS” (2015).

The one emphasized by Carter in ISIS militants is an existential condition to lack any form of understanding and commit acts of violence and devastation well beyond the limits of our western standards of civilization.

On the other hand, *subjectivity*, on which our lifestyle is based, it is not a must (Foucault 1975, 1993), but just a relatively new *social technology*, the form of psychological organization of the individual that makes possible our *ac-*

quisitive societies, since the Enlightenment and bourgeois revolutions (Luhmann 1971, 1973). It lays on the idea of a man which is self-referent, self-determined, aimed to self-achievement and apparently free and equal to any other, controlled by society only through the inventions of discipline and social roles. Typical of the peculiar historical, social, economic and political path of development of western modernity, *subjectivity* is handed down through primary and secondary socialization processes, in which the *subject* is “trained” to interpret different social roles, achieved through *selections* and *performances* (Marcuse 1955, 1964). The subject builds him/herself as an individual, titular of civil, political and social rights, recognized as such by a law entirely made by men, and completely immunized by any social link with traditional groups, as families, tribes or clans, and any religious entity (Bortolini 2005). What’s more, the state is laical and secularized, with roles open to all those having certain requisites and passing certain *selections*. Religion itself, from inherited and undisputable principle, capable to explain the sense of life and universe and the destiny of humankind, in the societies of *subjectivity* becomes a free and private choice of each individual, as such mostly irrelevant in orienting social action.

Many current Islamic countries are organized as modern states, and they have necessarily endorsed *subjectivity* as main form of psychological organization. *Subjectivity* is thus compatible to a certain degree with Islam, at least for those accepting to be citizens not less than Muslims, who observe the law of their countries, obey to civil and military authorities and respect the human rights of both men and women.

Mark Jurgensmeyer explains that for Al-Qaeda and any other fundamentalist group, the governments of Islamic countries organized as laical states are “satanized”, something which assumed the shape of devil, because “they have taken the degrading path of imitation of the forms of life of the societies without God” (Jurgensmeyer 2003: 201) which are the *acquisitive* societies, those founded on *subjectivity*. Pellicani states that this “satanization” of all what is founded on *subjectivity* “not only legitimates the terroristic use of violence: it turns it into sacred, transforming it in divine commandment; in addition, it connects it in the *frame* of an eschatological war of planetary dimensions and of cosmic-historical meaning” (Pellicani 2004: 88).

We can state that the Jihad of Islamic fundamentalists is against modern *subjectivity*, which is blaspheme and contemptible because it legitimates the existence of “societies without God”.

4. The great geo-political novelty:

Ascriptive Quasi-State Entities

Until the last decades of the twentieth century, the concept of the modern state was undisputed. All the territories of the globe were enclosed inside the boundaries of state entities. The end of colonial period was followed by the creation of new state entities in Africa, Asia, Middle East, Oceania and Americas, all on the western model, not all with ethnic and religious homogeneity, but each one with a name, a flag, a government, a civil service and a regular army and police forces. The principles of *subjectivity* were shared as well by liberal-democratic-capitalist and collectivist-socialist-com-

munist ideologies, requiring in both cases a superior secular state authority. This situation, from the end of the Cold War in 1989, underwent an increasing destabilization process.

Where the western style political organization of state, based on the secular principles of *subjectivity*, was overthrown by internal struggle, the traditional forms of social organization built around *ascription* seized the power over large areas. These forms of social organization were neither able, nor interested to re-build a state-like organization, so whole territories have been reduced to wreckage, exposed to the action of warlords and rogue armed groups. This is the present situation in a large part of Africa, but also of Middle East and several other areas of the world.

The Islamic fundamentalism has begun to show up as a global phenomenon well before the terroristic attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11th 2001 by Al-Quaeda, but even after then, USA and the rest of the western world didn't have the capacity to stop or to understand it. The USA and their Allies' political and military reaction caused even more disorder and mayhem to an already unstable situation in Middle East and in North Africa, overthrowing the consolidated dictatorial regimes of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (2003) and of Muammar Gaddafi in Lybia (2011). They were in fact both capable of controlling wide territories inhabited by many and mutually hostile tribal, religious and ethnic groups through national entities inspired by ideologies founded on *subjectivity*, the one of Bath Party in Iraq and of Socialist Jamairya in Lybia.

Where one traditional group was enough ethnically and religiously cohesive to seize the undisputed power over a wide

area, quasi-state entities based on *ascription* emerged. The most organized ones were the Taliban Emirate of Afghanistan and the Caliphate of ISIS. But many less organized ones also appeared, like the one of Boko Haram³, a jihadist *Wahbi-salaphite* organization controlling wide territories in Nigeria, Ciad and Camerun, responsible of 450 murders only in 2011 (Al Jazeera 2011). Islamist militant groups across the globe began declaring allegiance to ISIS Caliphate, some even carried out attacks in its name, including Boko Haram itself from 2015.

All these entities, larger or smaller, have some recurrent common traits: a strong common religious reference, an authoritarian ruler, both political and religious leader, and the complete abolition of all state-like institutions, such as regular armies, police and civil services, expression of the principles of *subjectivity* requiring the acknowledgement of *social roles*.

5. The Taliban Emirate of Afghanistan (1996-2001)

The word Taliban, in Pashtun language *ṭālebān*, comes from the arab *talib*, “student” or “researcher”, and identifies the Sunnite movement of Koranic schools students, formed on September 1994 in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar.

The movement, after the fall of the communist regime of president Najibullah, took Jalalabad on September 11th 1996 and the capital Kabul on September 27th, and assumed full control over two thirds of the country within June 1997 (Scarcella Prandstraller 2007: 111).

3. “Boko Haram” in Hausa language means “the western teachings are forbidden”.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996-2001), proclaimed on September 1996 under the guide of the Mullah Mohammed Omar, had two main collegial organs: a Council of six members in Kabul and a *Shura* or “Internal Council” with seat in Kandahar. The aim was to profess an Islamic Revolution, in order to establish the unity of Afghanistan under the rule of *Shari'a*.

Regular army was replaced by irregular forces of armed *Mujaiddeen*, with long beards and wearing traditional Pashtun hats, without any police force and civil service.

At the beginnings, the new government had the support of large part of the population, with the common purpose to fight against corruption and illegality. This achieved many positive results in a country devastated by many years of war.

However, the adoption of restrictive policies, the lack of an adequate administrative experience, the incapacity to build a new fiscal system, the economic failure, the dependence on Pakistan and the international isolation led the Taliban movement to lose much of the popular support previously enjoyed. What's more, the fact to be a movement mainly of Pashtun ethnicity, made it difficult to be accepted as a “national movement” and provoked the hostility of different minorities such as the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, and even more the Hazara, followers of *Sh'ia*.

The most difficult thing to be accepted by other ethnicities was the attempt of Talibans to impose to everybody their particular religious beliefs, habits, traditions and especially their “stiff and archaic interpretation of Islam”, prevalent in many rural areas of Pashtun ethnicity (Jalali 1999).

The enforcement of the Taliban interpretation of *Shari'a* was the specific task of a dedicated Department “for the Promotion of the Virtue and the Prevention of Vice”. This Department imposed very strict norms not just on public religious practice or acceptable social behaviour, but also on clothing, the detention and use of personal objects, the length of hair and beards and, of course, severe restrictions to the rights of women (Scarcella Prandstraller 2007: 112).

In five years of life (the Emirate has fallen under the USA and UK military attack on November 2001), the Taliban Emirate was acknowledged just by three countries: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and United Arab Emirates.

6. The ISIS Caliphate (2014-2017)

The proclamation of the Caliphate was done on June 29th 2014 by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (in Arab al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya), the jihadist salaphite organization of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, controlling an area in North-Eastern Syria and Western Iraq. The capital was the historical “Syrian city of Raqqa, with over 200,000 inhabitants, 160 kilometres east of Aleppo, in the 8th century the capital of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid”. Since its inception, the Islamic State has sought to establish an Islamic caliphate based on its extreme interpretation of Islam and *Shari'a* (Negri 2014).

In March 2005, after pledging itself to Al Qaeda and becoming Al Qaeda in Iraq, the group released an explanation of its ideology. It considered secularism, nationalism, tribalism, Baathism, and other beliefs and doctrines as violations of Islam and believed that all Sunni Muslims made up a single

nation. *Shiites* were considered apostates. It committed itself to spreading its own extreme interpretation of Islam and ultimately eliminating other belief systems from the world. ISIS “expanded as it carried out military offensives in Syria and Iraq. It fought against the governments of Iraq and Syria, tribal groups and militias in Iraq, the Kurdish Peshmerga, and various rebel groups in Syria” (Hashim 2014).

It has been the most successful attempt of fundamentalists to rebuild a “society around God” and affirm the triumph of an *ascriptive* human being, completely referent. Alberto Negri writes: “The IS has tried to establish a new Taliban Afghanistan in the heart of the basin of Mesopotamia, bordering the shores of the Mediterranean, creating what is already a mini-economic power. Its brutality is now legendary, just as that of the medieval sect of the *hasisiyyun*, Alamut’s “assassins.” Beheadings and crucifixions are needed to encourage entire cities to surrender without fighting. And yet, there is a level of sophistication never seen before in a jihadist movement” (Negri 2014).

The ISIS Caliphate was headed by three Councils: the *Shura Council*, the *Military Council*, and the *Security and Intelligence Council*. The Military Council was made up of three members, and the Shura Council included a cabinet of nine to eleven members. Baghdadi as “Caliph” oversaw both religious and political life in the Islamic State. ISIS at first established administrative control over a conquered area. After, ISIS laid the foundation for governance with an outreach center and a simple court system. After securing the region, it made the laws stricter, brought in religious police, and took over the education system. It also managed humanitarian aid

and often controlled vital basics, like bakeries, water treatment plants, and power plants (Stanford University 2017). Negri adds that, in addition to religious propaganda, one of the ISIS priorities was to institute Islamic courts in the occupied areas. Its aim has been mainly to reassure the population, giving order to areas which experienced chaos; the Islamic State did not consider itself a terrorist organisation, but “a sovereign state concerned with the moral and material wellbeing of its citizens”, with a solid network of basic services, food and water distribution, and a plenty of schools teaching the *Shari’a*. Negri explains that to ensure *Shari’a* “is applied more effectively, in addition to corporal punishment and summary executions”, ISIS “has organised patrols by the religious police, al-Hisba, tasked with “promoting virtue and averting vice,” opposing all possible expressions of disobedience”. In the largest cities as Raqqa and in the suburbs of Aleppo, ISIS “had organised the Dawa, literally “the Call”, public sessions at which the Koran was recited and religious sermons imparted as well as the distribution of food and drink to the people” (Negri 2014).

ISIS’ most important source of propaganda was internet, often using videos posted on-line. (Negri 2014). The Islamic State “financed itself through oil sales, first stealing oil products to sell and then operating oil refineries that it seized”. “Since 2012, ISIS has primarily relied on five sources of funding: illicit proceeds from occupied territory, kidnapping ransoms, donations via non-profit organizations, material support from foreign fighters, and fundraising through modern communication networks” (Stanford University 2017).

The ISIS Caliphate survived until October 2017, when its capital Raqqa was taken by a coalition of Kurdish and Arab militias advised by U.S. Special Forces.

Stephen Walt writes: “The defeat of the Islamic State was overdetermined and should not surprise us. Despite its fearsome behavior and access to some modest oil revenues, it was vastly weaker than Bolshevik Russia or revolutionary France or even most of its immediate neighbors. Indeed, it was able to emerge and seize control of a lot of mostly empty desert because of the power vacuum created by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent upheaval in Syria. Revolutionary movements sometimes succeed because they enjoy the advantage of surprise - as the Islamic State did when it first emerged - but it becomes harder for them to expand or survive, once more powerful countries are aware of the danger and take action to contain it. The Islamic State was no exception” (2017).

Robin Wright writes that “history will record that the Islamic State Caliphate - a bizarre pseudo-state founded on illusory goals, created by a global horde of *jihadis*, and enforced with perverted viciousness - survived for three years, three months and some eighteen days” (2017).

Conclusions

AQSE is a new sociological concept, related to a wide category of empirical cases with similar features. Therefore it is still current, even if the two most relevant cases of our times have been overrun and now became part of past history, because the social forces shaping them are still active and influencing societies and psychological systems of a growing number of individuals.

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